



**Photographs
& Stories**

not Houseless
Homeless

Ken Betsalel

not Houseless Homeless

*How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these?*

The stories and photographs selected for this project were taken down and made over a three-year period beginning in 1997 and represent my attempt to understand the meaning of home and homelessness in one North Carolina community. Over the course of the project I learned to see that people who are homeless do not live in a world of complete isolation, devoid of human relationships. As Dwight, a then homeless man, explained to me, he was "houseless not homeless." The stories and poems presented here were taken down by me and originally published in *A HOPE News* (a homeless newsletter published by Hospitality

House, a nonprofit agency in Asheville, dedicated to working with people who are homeless). The stories and poems are reprinted with their permission and are part of a traveling exhibition made possible by the North Carolina Humanities Council.

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A Homeless Woman's Story

LENA . . .

IN HER OWN WORDS

I left Charlotte to come to Asheville and I found a place to sleep under the Bridge at I-40. I had worked as a certified nursing assistant for 17 years but lost my job when my family fell apart.

When I got to Asheville I got a job on the housekeeping staff of one of the best hotels in town. When I got the job I had to lie about my address because I didn't want to tell the lady who hired me that I was homeless. I figured if I told the truth about where I lived I wouldn't get the job.

I worked for 10 days straight. Then one day I was called in by the lady who had hired me. She told me she had found out I was homeless. She told me in so many words I could no longer work in the hotel. The hotel had a reputation to

protect and it wouldn't look good if they used homeless people to clean rooms.

Somehow she said I was no longer qualified to work in the hotel. All the other girls I worked with said it wasn't fair. That I was one of the best, that I did my job well. I told the lady, how am I supposed to get a place to live if I don't have employment? She had no answer for me.

It is very degrading the labels they put on homeless people. Of course, I used to do the very same thing. I would see a homeless person on the street and say it was their fault . . . they don't try hard enough. Now I know different.

It is all so very strange. That lady didn't know how hard it was for me to stay alive. And now she was letting me go.

It was Ronny who called the ambulance when I got frostbite and almost lost my foot. When I went back to the bridge after I got out of the hospital, I found the State had

confiscated our tent and our blankets. They had taken everything.

I stayed with George, another homeless person who had a campsite near by. I figured it was better than staying at a shelter without transportation. At least I was closer to the health clinic where I had to go for treatment for my foot. I had also burnt my arm real bad when I fell into a camp fire trying to stay warm.

I woke up one morning crying. I hurt so bad. I didn't know if I could go on. That's when Al showed up like some angel. He said, "you can't stay here."

I have my own room now. Beautiful light coming through this window. I don't believe God wants us to be homeless.

My plan now is to get recertified so I can work as a RNS. I would like to work with older people.

Lena R.

Life of a Homeless Man

I don't want the Reverend
to see me standing here smoking.
I will wait till she goes.
How come you didn't interview me?
You listened to everybody else's story
but mine.
Sorry, I didn't think you wanted to be disturbed.

Laid off last week,
day before Thanksgiving.
I have nothing to be thankful for.
All I have known is foster care.
My mother abandoned me when I was three.
Empty New York tenement building.

How come you didn't want to interview me?

Gang life—I have seen it all.
Woke up in buildings with defecation

all around me,
condoms, tampons and piss.
I got to get out. ' .
Went to Charlotte.
Dope gives you power—
at least over those you are selling it to.
Seven years in prison
makes you bitter.

I am a child of institutions.
A homeless man who no longer
wants to be homeless.
I look around and ask myself
am I better than other people?
Am I worse?
When it comes right down to it,
I think I am just the same.

I think I am a person
who can do some good.
I am a homeless man
who no longer wants to be homeless.

Tony T.







A Call for Help

I didn't know
it was a call
for help.
When I pulled those crosses up.
The caretaker came running,
then the priest.
"Why did you do this?!"
"I don't know why."
I had come down from the east
to start a new life.
It was May.
Lived outside
under the foundations
of a broken-down house.
Cleaned the flea market
when it closed.
Couldn't say why
I pulled those tiny crosses up.
Felt dead inside.
The police were called.
Sentenced to 38 days in jail.
I wasn't crazy. I was tired.
Needed help.
Didn't know how to ask.
Out of this I built a new life.
A lot has changed.

Richard C.







When You Are Ready

BRENDA'S STORY

When you are ready to change you will know. No one can tell you. I woke up last night. It was 4:30 in the morning. I was safe and warm. In my own bed. Not under a bridge.

I have my dreams back. I was so thankful to be alive, I wanted to tell the world about how happy I felt. My daughters. My grandson.

I live for that little boy.

Thirty days sober! I had tried to stop drinking. Failed a thousand times before. This time I know it's going to work.

David at A HOPE told me, "Brenda—You haven't burnt your bridges—you bombed

them! You've left nothing standing." Maybe that's what I needed to hear. Maybe that's how far I had to go. David looked me straight in the eyes—could tell I wanted to change. Believed me when I told him I was ready to change. Got me into a program. Lots of people helped. I had to be ready. I believe I am.

Homeless for four years.

I have seen my best friends die of drink.

Stayed under bridges where it was dry.

Loss and pain is what I knew.

Seen love turn angry like a fist.

Been hit on and hurt.

When I saw my last friend die I knew it was time. Don't know why.

The great spirit is protecting me. Cody my grandson, he's what I live for now.

I have been working part time. Staying at Hospitality House. In a recovery program. Trying to put a new life together.

One small step at a time.

Only you know when you are ready.

A matter of heart.

Brenda H.





The Myth of Homelessness

When you pass a homeless person on the street and you say, hey there's a bum—he may not be. He may be just like you.

Homelessness doesn't happen all at once. A child becomes sick and you can't pay the bills. A spouse dies and you go into despair. A divorce tears a family apart. A flood takes your house. There are many roads to becoming homeless.

It's a myth to think people choose to be without a place to call home. Homelessness becomes a state of mind where the only thing you have is despair.

It's important to recognize others can help—government, friends, the church or synagogue—but first they have to believe the homeless person is a human being, a person worth working with.

The myth is that the homeless person is something less than us.

Dwight





We Were Just Sitting There Talking

A VOLUNTEER'S STORY

"We were just sitting there talking," as Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement put it in her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. Four of us: three homeless men and myself.

We couldn't be more different. Frank's foster mother was murdered when he was 15 and he has been making it on his own ever since. John's father was a successful insurance broker until his drinking destroyed his life. And Andy, oh Andy! He got married—a child on the way. As for me, I am a teacher. Someone who thinks things are too complicated to blame any one but ourselves for the fix we are in. Maybe that's why I think listening to homeless

people is so important. What I have learned talking with homeless people is that they are really no different than we are. Than I am. Listen for yourself.

We talked about homelessness.

The sense of despair that comes when every road you take seems to be the wrong road.

Every step a misstep.

The lack of compassion in friend and stranger.

How hard it is to scrape up the cash to get an apartment.

The difficulty of seasonal work and working for your next meal.

We talked of the disappointment and frustration that comes with not having the skills to compete for a better

paying job. We talked about the loved ones we missed.

John hasn't seen his daughter since his wife went to live with her father. Andy's real dad claims not to know him. Frank has given up on ever going back to South Carolina.

How different are we? I too miss family and friends. And after my divorce I worry about the future of my two sons more than ever before. I too long for a place to call home.

Day wrote, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."

We talked about how it is up to us to change things.

To work in small ways for a better world.









**“The whole less one part is
not the whole.”**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau,
The Social Contract

**“I behold the others as
myself and myself as them.”**

Friedrich Hegel,
The Phenomenology of Spirit

**“Home is the place where
when you go there, they have
to take you in.”**

Robert Frost,
Death of a Hired Hand

**“Don’t know nothin’, but
what we see . . .”**

Zora Neale Hurston,
Their Eyes Were Watching God

**“Home is where we start
from. As we grow older
the world becomes stranger,
the pattern more
complicated of dead and
living.”**

T.S. Eliot,
East Coker

**“In every child who is born,
under no matter what
circumstances, and of no
matter what parents, the
potentiality of the human
race is born again: and in
him, too, once more, and of
each of us, our terrific
responsibility towards human
life; towards the utmost idea
of goodness, of the horror of
error, and of God.”**

James Agee,
*Let Us Now Praise Famous
Men*

**“We have all known the long
loneliness and we have
learned that the only solution
is love and that love comes
with community.”**

Dorothy Day,
The Long Loneliness

**“Could a greater miracle
take place than for us to look
through each other’s eyes for
an instant.”**

Henry David Thoreau,
Walden Pond

**"Who degrades another
degrades me . . ."**

Walt Whitman,
Leaves of Grass

**"Life and the memory of it
so compressed they've
turned into each other."**

Elizabeth Bishop,
Poem

**"I know what I have seen and
what I have seen makes me
know I have to say I *know*. . . .
There are two things we have
to do, love each other and
raise our children. We have
to do that! The alternative,
for me, would be suicide."**

James Baldwin,
Conversations

**"How curious a land is this—
how full of untold story, of
tragedy and laughter, and
the legacy of human life;
shadowed with a tragic past,
and big with future promise!"**

W.E.B. Du Bois,
The Souls of Black Folks

**"The Other becomes my
neighbor precisely through
the way the face summons
me, calls me, begs for me,
and in so doing recalls my
responsibility and calls me
into question."**

Emmanuel Levinas,
The Language of the Self

**"We were all eager for the
categorical solution, afraid of
the clumsy, undefined,
paradoxical flow of life and
its events which may in fact
be the truth of it."**

Robert Coles,
Children of Crisis

**“As soon as I can get around without this walker,
I plan to volunteer again . . .”**

*William “Pop” Young,
a formerly homeless man*

The pictures and stories in this document convey the simple notion that each homeless person is a wonderfully unique individual— a person filled with human dignity even if they themselves can’t see it in the moment. They remind us that the decisions we make as a community about what our communities should look like, and how we should spend our resources, impact very real people. And those people have no less humanity than the rest of us. Once we see that humanity, and feel the connection between us, maybe we’ll decide as a community that it is no longer okay for some of us to go houseless.

*Martha Are, Executive Director,
Hospitality House of Asheville*

For more information on how you can get involved with people working to break the cycle of homelessness, contact:

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